

THE
R**etumne**
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BY

HAMILTON SMITH.

THE LORD'S MIND FOR HIS OWN TODAY.

“AMID THE ENCIRCLING GLOOM,
WALKING IN THE FEAR OF THE LORD,
OBEDIENT TO THE WORD OF THE LORD,
JEALOUS OF THE NAME OF THE LORD,
AND WAITING FOR THE COMING OF THE LORD.”

THE RETURNED REMNANT.

Some five hundred years before the Lord came into the world, an opportunity was given, through the providential goodness of God, for His earthly people to escape from the captivity in Babylon, and to return to God's land and build God's house.

The mass of God's people chose to remain in the land of their captivity, but a remnant of about forty-two thousand, "whose spirit God had stirred" left Babylon and returned to Jerusalem (EZRA I. 5.). Having returned, and set up an altar for worship, at once they were faced with the opposition of those who sought to hinder the special work for which they had been set free from Babylon. For, be it noted, this opposition was, not against the return to the land, but against the building of the House and the walls of the city (EZRA IV.1,12).

Through the weakness of the people this opposition for a time succeeded. But sixteen years after the return, God raised up the prophets Haggai and Zechariah, who aroused the people under the lead of Zerubbabel and Joshua, to complete the building of the house of God.

Having failed to stop the building of the house the enemy made a second attempt to mar their witness for God, by seeking to lower their walk through leading them into worldly associations. Thus, when Ezra, with a further band of exiles returned to the land, it came to light that many of the people, including some of their leaders, were associating with the people of the adjoining lands and doing according to their abominations (EZRA IX. 1.). The walk that is worthy of God's house, and the necessary discipline of the house, had not been maintained. Through the ministry of Ezra, the people humbled themselves before God, confessed their sins and dealt with this evil.

Thirteen years pass, and this remnant that had escaped from captivity were found in great affliction and reproach, seeing that "the wall of Jerusalem", that speaks of separation, was broken down, and "the gates" that stand for the place of discipline, were burned with fire (NEH. I. 2-3). Under the exhortations of Nehemiah, the people were led to build the walls and erect the gates (NEH. III VI.15). The result was that once again separation and discipline were maintained.

Alas! in spite of these conflicts and revivals, we find, only a few years later, in the days of Malachi, that, though the house of God had been rebuilt, and the walls and the gates set up, and a regular service of sacrifices and feasts was being conducted, yet the moral state of both leaders and led was at such a thoroughly low ebb, that, when rebuked by the Messenger of the Lord, they were blind to their condition and indifferent to the Lord's warnings.

Four hundred and eighty years late, when the Lord came to the earth, we discover this returned remnant had become divided into several parties - Pharisees, Sadducees, and Herodians. When brought into the presence of the Lord, the low condition of every party was made manifest. It is true they were no longer associated with

Babylonish corruptions, nor were they giving way to idolatry. Moreover, the temple was rebuilt and the round of religious services was being performed. But the Lord has to charge them with being hypocrites seeing that though they honoured God with their lips, their heart was far from Him (MARK II. 6). Furthermore, like the fig tree with its leaves but no fruit, they made a great show of piety before men, but in their lives there was no fruit for God; and the house that they had been set free to build for God's service, they had corrupted for their own ends. (MARK XI. 12-15).

Thus, in the day of the Lord it is clear that on the one hand, the great mass of God's earthly people were still dispersed in captivity amidst Babylonish and other corruptions, though, indeed, amongst them were many God-fearing individuals, as we know from the glimpse we have of them in the books of Esther and Daniel. On the other hand, as we have seen, those "whose spirit God had stirred" in the beginning to return to the land and build the house, had in their end become broken up into different parties, marked with much outward piety before men but with little or no fruit before God; with faultless expressions on their lips when they approached God but with hearts far from Him.

We do well to ask ourselves "Has the solemn history of this returned remnant no warning voice for the people of God today? and, very specially, does it not speak to those who, over one hundred years ago had their eyes opened to see the truth of the Church as the house of God in which the Spirit dwells, and as the body of which Christ is Head?" (EPH I. 22, 23 II 20-22)

With their spirits moved by God to answer to this light concerning Christ and the Church a number of God's people, in obedience to this word separated from the systems of men, and took a place outside the camp order of religion to gather to Christ and to seek to walk in the light of the house of God where the Spirit dwells, and the Body of which Christ is the Head.

Alas! as of old the returned remnant broke down in responsibility so again we have to face the sad fact that those who have left the systems of men to gather to Christ have grievously failed. In the presence of this failure, it surely becomes us to look back and ask ourselves, "What has been the history of this movement?" Then to look round and ask "What is the present condition of those who have professed to return to God's ground for His people?"

Looking back, does it not become clear that from the outset, and through the passing years, those who have taken this path in obedience to the Word of God, have had to face the constant attacks of the enemy in different forms? As with the returned remnant of old, the first great attack of the enemy was an effort in 1845 to undermine and set aside the principles of God's house that they were seeking to maintain, by once again setting up a system of clericalism that ignored the presence of the Spirit of God

and the Lordship and Headship of Christ. Moreover, through the passing years has it not become plain that, apart from adopting a system that is an actual denial of the house of God, we have failed by neglecting the truth of the house of God? Further, as in the days of Meggai, behind this neglect we have to judge ourselves for the worldliness that has sought our own things rather than the things of God. This neglect of the truth and worldliness has led to the gradual breaking down of the walls of separation and to laxity in the exercise of a scriptural discipline.

If, as we look back, we have to confess that this has been our sorrowful history, what, we may ask, is the result as we look round on present conditions? Are we not at once faced with the humbling fact that those who left the systems of men to give Christ His place as the one Lord, and as the Head, and walk in the unity of the body have so failed in subjection to the Lord and in holding the Head, that, like the returned remnant of old they have become broken and divided? Have we not to admit, as one has said, that "The failure of the church is universal, and among all the fragments thereof, nowhere more marked than with Brethren, so-called.... If I imagine that, in the wreck, one entire company has alone preserved its integrity, and is right where all else is wrong, it is tantamount to saying that one has not yet discovered the totality of the ruin."

Furthermore, have we not to confess that behind this state of division, and the immediate causes of different divisions, there exists a low moral condition. Thus while each company of God's people may still profess to be gathered to the Name of the Lord, with the Lord in the midst, should we not find, if we really got into the presence of the Lord, that while we may draw near to God with faultless expressions of prayer and praise on our lips, too often our hearts may have been far from Him; and that while there may be the outward profession of piety before men, there is too little fruit in our secret lives before God. We may well recall the warning words, written by a servant of the Lord in 1853, when he said, "Saints gathered together, in the Name of the Lord Jesus, have to do with realities. In His presence everything is exposed, naked and bare before the eyes of Him with whom we have to do. It is one thing to have got into our place.... as gathered together in the Name of Jesus, and it is another to learn what is befitting the place; in other words, how to behave in it. Realities, not pretensions have their answer in God. Now, in our day, we have had too little reality and too much pretension.... Believers need to see and acknowledge their nakedness, abandon their folly, and in humility own things as they are... The presence of the Holy Ghost is a reality, and surely leads to acknowledgement of our real condition" (Pres. Test. IV. 155).

In the presence of this failure we may well ask what can these do who own the break-down and desire to answer to the mind of God, as set forth in scripture, for a day of ruin? We have already seen that the history and failure of the returned

remnant which is rich with instruction and encouragement? Let us remember that throughout the history of this remnant with all its failure, there existed those who feared the Lord who mourned the low condition, who confessed the failure, and sought to be true to God's house.

This remnant within the remnant is clearly seen in the day of Ezra when a number confessed their failure and "wept very sore" (EZRAS. 1.). Again we hear of them in the day of Malachi, when we read of those "that feared the Lord, and thought upon His Name." Centuries later when Christ came to the earth, we find that, amidst the increasing gloom of the passing years, God had preserved a remnant for Himself. Thus, if the presence of the Lord exposed the low condition of the mass, it also brought to light the existence of these Godly individuals of whom Zacharias and his wife, Joseph and Mary, Simeon and Anna are shining examples.

Seeing then that this Godly remnant had the special approval of the Lord it will be well to carefully consider their distinguishing traits as recorded by the Spirit of God.

1st / THEY FEARED THE LORD. Their first and outstanding characteristic. (MALACHI. III. 16) Does this not imply that they were not content with an outward show of piety before men, or with a round of religious services or with drawing near to God with correct expressions on their lips; but that their secret lives were lived in the sense of being under the eye of God. They were conscious that their words were heard by God, their acts seen by God, and their thoughts known to God. With the Psalmist such could say, He that planteth the ear shall He not hear? He that formed the eye, shall He not see?... He that teacheth man knowledge, shall He not know?

2nd / THEY HAD FELLOWSHIP WITH ONE ANOTHER. Being right with God there was nothing to hinder this. So we read that they "spake often one to another." This was the second great mark of this Godly remnant. Their common fear of the Lord drew them together in a holy happy fellowship of which the Lord was the bond.

3rd / THEY THOUGHT UPON HIS NAME. They not only feared the Lord but they thought upon His Name. Does this not imply that they turned from themselves and their fellowmen to delight their souls in the excellencies and glory of the Lord; for "name" in scripture describes the character of the one bearing the name? but also, it surely suggests, that in all their ways, and walk, and associations, they did not consider what would be for their earthly advantage and ease, but what would be for the glory of the Lord's great Name? "THEY THOUGHT UPON HIS NAME"

4th / THE COMING OF CHRIST. A further distinguishing mark of this Godly remnant was that they had before them the coming of Christ, for we read "Unto you that fear My Name, shall the Sun of Righteousness arise with healing in His wings." They had no expectation that the surrounding darkness would be dispelled or that the world

would grow better, or that any general healing would take place among the people of God "until the day break and the shadows flee away", when the Sun of righteousness will arise with healing in his wings.

Such were the outstanding marks of this Godly remnant within the remnant. We do not hear that they were possessed of great gifts that might have exalted them among the people of God; or great works of charity that would have earned the world's applause; or great numbers that would have brought them into prominence. But in spite of their outward weakness, and smallness of numbers, they had the Lord's approval in a day of ruin, and will shine as His jewels in the day of glory.

As with this Godly remnant, so now, we are living in a day of ruin and break-down, not only in the government of the world, and in the great Christian profession, but also amongst the true people of God. But as of old, so again we have clear indications in the New Testament that, in spite of all the general break-down, there has been, and will be to the end, a godly remnant. Furthermore we learn from the Word what are the outstanding marks of those who, in these last difficult days meet with the Lord's approval, as well as the path they are called to tread in the midst of the ruin.

FIRST, as with the Godly in the midst of the returned remnant, let us own our failure and humble ourselves in the dust before God, judging the low moral condition that has led to confusion and division. As we have seen Ezra confessed the failure with weeping. The Lord in His day wept over the low condition of the returned remnant. The apostle Paul warned the saints "night and day with tears" as he foresaw the ruin coming in amongst the people of God. Timothy, in his day was a man of tears. Let us challenge ourselves! Have we, with broken hearts, ever wept before the Lord over our individual and collective failures?

SECONDLY, as of old in the presence of their weakness and failure the Godly found relief in turning to the Lord, so, let us remember, that however great our failure, however many our difficulties and whatever our weakness we have an unfailing resource in Christ, Himself. Of Him we can say, "Thou remainedst" and "Thou art the Same" (HEB. 13:8). In the divided state of the Lord's people we may seek to escape from false doctrine or evil ways or relief from looseness and independency, by changing from one company to another. But is this the Lord's way of relief? When the disciples "had to face the storm in a ship tossed with waves" Peter did not seek a way of escape from the dangers by leaving one ship to join another ship. His resource was Christ. Acting in faith and attracted by love he left the ship and walked on the water, "to go to Jesus". In obedience to the word, we rightly leave the camp orders of religion, but, in doing so, let our first great object be to "go forth unto HIM without the camp." Unless Christ be our centre of gathering we shall only end in forming another company after the order of the camp.

THIRDLY, as with the Godly of old, who "thought upon His Name", if we have Christ before us, we shall refuse all that in principle or practice is a denial of His Headship and Lordship. This will involve that, in obedience to Scripture we take the path of separation; for the word is "Let everyone that nameth the Name of the Lord withdraw from iniquity." Again each one is exhorted to purge himself from vessels to dishonour by "separating himself from them" (II.TIM. II. 19-21 H.T.)

Further, in view of these last difficult days, when professing Christendom becomes a vast system having the form of piety, but denying the power thereof, we are exhorted "to turn away" from such; in other words we are to "go forth.... without the camp" II.TIM. III. 5. HEB.XIII. 13). This will involve that we not only separate from corrupt bodies where wrong doctrine and evil practices are unjudged, but that we must come out from every company that by their principles and practices deny the truth of the fellowship into which we are called, and the one body of which we form part.

FOURTHLY, if we have taken the separate path to give Christ His place as Lord and Head, and walk in the light of the truth, let us each seek to be found walking in a right moral condition in our individual lives before God. As with the godly of Malachi's day let us walk in the fear of God. It is not enough to separate from that which is false, for as it has been said "If we carry with us the seeds of the corruption, unheeded and unjudged, the result will be the same again, only worse, by reason of our increased light, responsibility and profession." (PRES. TEST. IV. 352). Let us each take heed to the word that exhorts us to "lay aside all malice, and all guile, and hypocrisies, and envies, and all evil speakings" (I PETER II. 1). Having gone forth "unto Him", let us seek to abide in Him and thus walk in secret communion with Him. It has been well said that Christ must live in me, if I am to live like Christ or for Christ.

FIFTHLY, let us each seek to get back to "first love". If that which had the Lord's approval, above all else, at the beginning of the church period, was personal love to Himself, so at the end, when all has been ruined in our hands through the loss of first love, that which the Lord looks for is individual love to Himself. His last appeal to His own, in the midst of the ruin, is to remind us of His love, and to seek the response of our love. Thus we hear Him say, "As many as I love I rebuke and chasten: be zealous therefore and repent. Behold I stand at the door and am Knocking: if any man hear My voice, and open the door I will come in unto him and sup with him and be with me." (REV. III. 19. 20) He is not demanding some great sacrifice or service that will make a display before the world, or exalt us in the eyes of men; but He looks for a heart that will respond to His love, and thus be led into communion with Himself. To such an one He may indeed open a door of service, but it will be service flowing

SIXTHLY, if, as with the Godly in the days of Malachi, we seek individually to walk in the fear of the Lord, it will also be our privilege, as in their case to have fellowship with one another. Of those saints we read that they "spake often one to another." And in this day of break-down, those who have separated from the corruptions of Christendom are encouraged to "follow righteousness, faith, love, peace, with them that call on the Lord out of a pure heart" II. TIM. II. 22.

They may be but a feeble few but they have the word of the Lord that tells us "Where two or three are gathered together unto my Name there am I in the midst of them" (MATT. XVIII. 20). Such will make no pretension of being the only people on earth with whom the Lord is found, nor will they seek to form a new fellowship. They will seek in humble obedience to the word to act in the light of the fellowship into which all saints have been called, and of the one Body of which all Saints form part.

LASTLY, as in the days of Malachi, the Godly had before them the coming of Christ, and realised that there would be no recovery for Israel until "the Sun of righteousness arise with healing in His wings;" so it is our privilege to have before us the coming of the Lord, knowing that no power on earth can patch up the fragments of the shattered church or heal the sorrows of the world. He alone can gather His people together, heal the broken hearts, bind up our wounds and still the storms of life.

If, then, these are some of the outstanding marks that scripture sets before us, of those that have the approval of the Lord, both in the closing days of the Jewish period, and in the last days of Christendom, may we seek grace to profit by the example of the Godly remnant of old, and answer to the Lord's mind for His own today. Thus amid the encircling gloom may it be the desire of our hearts to be found walking in the fear of the Lord, obedient to the word of the Lord, jealous of the Name of the Lord, and looking for the Coming of the Lord.

HAMILTON SMITH. 1941.